



The Higher Education Center
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Telling It Like It Is

Using Social Norms Marketing Campaigns to Reduce Student Drinking

by William DeJong and Jeff Linkenbach

Few contemporary problems seem as intractable as high-risk drinking by college students. For years, institutions of higher education have invested in alcohol awareness programs, peer education, and "alternative" recreational activities, yet the percentage of college students engaged in high-risk drinking has continued at intolerable levels since the 1980s, even while this type of abusive alcohol consumption by high school students and other young adults not in college has gone down.

National publicity about the alcohol-related deaths of students at Louisiana State University, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and the University of Virginia, and then the spate of "right to party" riots at Michigan State University, the University of Colorado, and other campuses, has spurred college officials to look for new answers. Many college officials are now trying to re-engineer both the campus environment and the surrounding community in ways that will discourage high-risk drinking.

The significance of higher education leaders taking a visible stand to prevent student alcohol abuse is obvious. Less apparent, however, is the possibility that increased attention to the problem, if talked about in the wrong way, might actually make things worse. How this can happen, and how it can be avoided, is something that college presidents and other senior administrators need to understand.

Perceived Drinking Norms

Whether and how much students drink partly depend on their perceptions of campus drinking norms. Students take in all kinds of information about what is typical or normative among their peers. What is seen as typical can then become what is expected. Where students see lots of students using alcohol, they may feel pressure to fit in by drinking. Where they see fewer students drinking, they feel less pressure and may drink less.

What is critical here is not just the actual level of alcohol consumption but students' *perceptions* of how much drinking is going on. Those perceptions are prone to error. Researchers have found that, whatever the true level of high-risk drinking on campus, students tend to greatly overestimate the percentage of their peers who engage in dan-

gerous alcohol consumption. Often the disparity between reality and perception is enormous.

Consider data recently collected by Montana State University's Department of Health & Human Development in a statewide survey of 18- to 24-year-old adults. Men reported that they typically have three drinks per occasion, but they estimated that other men in Montana their age typically have seven drinks. Women were guilty of the same misperception, reporting that they typically have two drinks per occasion but estimating that their peers typically consume five drinks. Findings of this magnitude are standard.

Sociologist Wesley Perkins contends that this pattern of misperception — what he has called a "reign of error" — can have severe repercussions. If college students believe that most students drink heavily, then high-risk drinking rates may rise in response. What can emerge, Perkins says, is a self-fulfilling prophecy: The more students who believe that high-risk drinking is common, the more high-risk drinking will actually occur.

The entry of first-year students into college presents a time of particular vulnerability. Incoming students are seeking information on how to act in their new role, away from parental control. If they come to believe that the way to fit in is through risky alcohol use, then many of them will follow that path.

Social Norms Marketing Campaigns

Perkins and other prevention experts began to ask whether this dynamic could be turned around by informing students about how much drinking is really going on, as opposed to what the students think is the case. This strategy makes sense. If students more accurately perceive how much drinking is really going on, then this information should change their perception of the norm, which in turn should lead to reductions in high-risk drinking.

The effort to get this message out — using publicity events, student newspapers, posters, email messages, and other campus-based media — is called a social norms marketing campaign.

Michael Haines and his colleagues at Northern Illinois University (NIU) were the first to initiate a social norms

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marketing campaign along these lines. Supported by a grant from the U.S. Department of Education's Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE), NIU first expanded its traditional approaches to prevention, which included educational presentations and other awareness events, an advertising campaign, and implementation of new policies — all driven by a focus on the negative consequences of alcohol abuse. Annual student surveys suggested that these efforts had little impact on high-risk drinking.

Faced with these disappointing results, in the next academic year Haines started NIU's social norms marketing campaign. A year later, the next student survey showed that students had a somewhat more realistic picture of the true level of alcohol consumption on campus. Before the campaign, students had said that 69 percent of NIU students could be classified as high-risk (or "binge") drinkers. Afterward, students estimated the figure at 57 percent. The reported high-risk drinking rate was 43 percent before the campaign and approximately 38 percent a year later. Survey respondents also reported a 5 percent reduction in alcohol-related injuries to self, plus a 33 percent reduction in alcohol-related injuries to others.

Encouraged, Haines and his colleagues have repeated the campaign for several years, and annual surveys continue to show steady declines in student alcohol abuse. By 1998, the high-risk drinking rate had dropped to 25 percent. This decline has been at a time when the national rate, as measured by the University of Michigan's *Monitoring the Future Study*, has held relatively steady around 40 percent.

Inspired by NIU's results, the University of Arizona launched its own campaign. Like NIU, Arizona had a long history of prevention programming that featured traditional approaches, again with little observed impact on high-risk drinking. With grant support, program staff developed a social norms marketing campaign similar to the NIU effort and with similar outcomes. Annually administered surveys showed a drop in the high-risk drinking rate from 43 percent in 1995 to 36 percent in 1996 and 31 percent in 1997.

Western Washington University (WWU) has the same story to tell. WWU implemented its social norms marketing campaign in the 1997–98 academic year as part of a larger prevention program. The campaign was built around a series of 10 advertisements placed in the widely read student newspaper. In 1996, prior to the campaign, the high-risk drinking rate at WWU was estimated at 34 percent, and in 1998, after the campaign, at 27 percent.

Hobart and William Smith Colleges, a small, liberal arts school in upstate New York, is another institution that has tried this approach. In 18 months, college officials saw a 21 percent decline in reported high-risk drinking rates following the campaign.

Each of these evaluations is open to criticism. Two common flaws are worth mentioning here: the absence of

data from specific comparison schools, and a lack of specific information on other campus and community factors that might be affecting high-risk alcohol consumption. Proponents of this approach agree that more definitive research is needed to prove the value of social norms marketing campaigns.

Even so, the consistent pattern of findings reported by these several campuses — years of relative stasis, followed by a social norms marketing campaign, reduced misperceptions of student drinking, and then an approximate 10 to 25 percent drop in the high-risk drinking rate — is impressive, especially in light of survey data showing relatively little change at the national level. Many college administrators are now adding a social norms marketing campaign to their list of must-do prevention activities.

Implications for College Administrators

Prevention expert Alan Berkowitz has said that the impact of misperceived drinking norms can be likened to students feeling social pressure from "imaginary peers" to drink. A clear implication for college administrators is to avoid making statements that reinforce misperceptions of campus drinking norms, fortifying the impression that "everyone" drinks and does so in an abusive manner.

Following this advice doesn't mean running from uncomfortable truths. If there is a student death, a serious crime, or any other crisis associated with high-risk drinking at a campus, the facts must be acknowledged, discussed, and acted on. When data from an annual survey on student drinking is compiled, the institution should make that information public.

It is equally important, however, to champion the positive norms associated with the majority of students who drink responsibly. But what if the majority of students on campus are high-risk drinkers? Even here, there is a positive message that should go out. Remember, whatever the level of alcohol consumption might be, it is very likely that most students think it is even higher. Administrators need to do whatever they can to correct that misperception.

Even if you can't cut down on the percentage who drink heavily per se, you can reinforce the "abnormality" of behaving badly while drunk. Students want a safe campus, no matter how much they drink, and the vast majority will support social norms that reject impaired driving, assault, date rape, and vandalism.

Communication regarding alcohol issues then becomes a matter of balance between, on the one hand, the serious consequences associated with the minority of students who abuse alcohol, and, on the other, the moderate or healthy norms espoused by the majority. Over time, expression of these positive norms should nudge student behavior in the right direction.

Another implication is that administrators must be vigilant to respond to sensationalized reporting of college stu-

dent drinking. Clearly, misleading headlines or vivid accounts of student misbehavior can lead students to overestimate how much drinking is going on. Remember that college-bound high school students are also taking in these news accounts, which will affect their expectations of college. With that in mind, college administrators should work with reporters to develop positive stories about campus life. Doing so requires a working knowledge of the news business but it can be done successfully.

Using the Right Terminology

A final note concerns the terminology that college administrators use to describe abusive drinking. The term *binge drinking* has become the accepted catch-phrase for describing abusive alcohol consumption by U.S. college students, largely as a result of Henry Wechsler's 1994 article in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, in which he reported the results of his national survey on college student drinking.

For men, Wechsler defined binge drinking as having five or more drinks in a row on a single occasion within the past two weeks, and for women as having four or more drinks in a row. By this measure, 50 percent of men and 39 percent of women (44 percent overall) were classified by Wechsler as binge drinkers. The headlines followed.

NIU's Haines and others have criticized Wechsler's definition, claiming that it distorts the nature and scope of the problem because it does not specify a time period over which the alcohol is consumed "on a single occasion." Four or five drinks "in a row" over a several-hour period does not conform to the popular notion or even to the clinical definition of a "binge," which is a multiple-day drinking episode with extended period of intoxication, also known as a "bender." In the public mind, therefore, newspaper headlines proclaiming that "nearly half" of college students are "binge drinkers" only serve to create an exaggerated view of student drinking.

The real worry is not that students are consuming a certain number of drinks but that they may be doing so at a rate that elevates their blood alcohol level, leading to impairment. If researchers take into account the amount of time over which the alcohol was consumed, it is apparent that the percentage of students who are consuming alcohol at dangerous levels is lower than Wechsler's "binge drinking" rate would imply.

As an alternative, many prevention experts are coming to prefer the terms destructive drinking or high-risk drinking. An additional advantage of these terms is that they put the focus on what most college administrators, parents, and

students care about — the dangerous, alcohol-fueled misconduct of students who abuse alcohol.

Finding Support for Policy Change

Alcohol problems on college campuses are not new, and quick-fix approaches will not work. To achieve long-term social change, college presidents and other senior administrators must work to modify the campus and community environments in which students make decisions about their use of alcohol. This complex undertaking will require substantial effort over a number of years.

Policy reform cannot go too far beyond existing norms without provoking resistance. It follows, then, that support for change will be less forthcoming if students, faculty, and administrators have an exaggerated misperception of student drinking. This becomes yet another reason to make people aware of the positive social norms that exist on campus. By communicating the fact that the majority of students are already practicing safe, moderate behaviors, college administrators can enlist the support they need for additional change.

The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official position of the U.S. Department of Education or the State of Montana.

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